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Dr. George Warren Wood

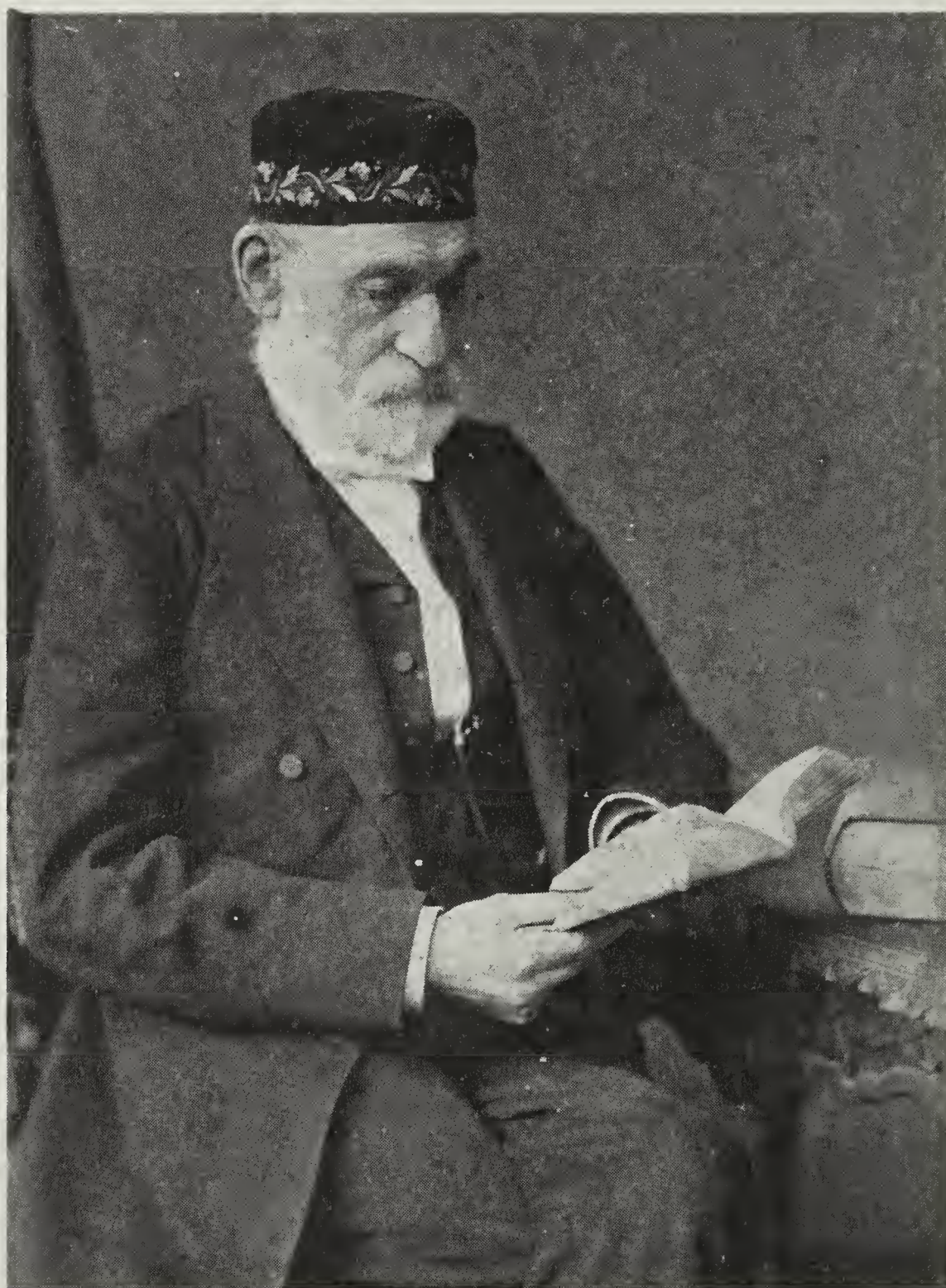






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THE REVEREND GEORGE WARREN WOOD, D.D.

1814-1901

*An appreciation written by*  
*his granddaughter,*  
*SARAH S. LYON*

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## A CHILD'S MEMORY

Christmas was the biggest event of the year in the "Gay Nineties."

And now the happiest moment of her tenth Christmas had come. She was about to collect the books she had received, preparatory to slipping away to a private nook where she could revel in a luxury of reading. Toys, games, dolls, mittens could remain where they lay; it was books she loved. At that instant she realized that one volume was missing, — "*The Three Scouts*," a long anticipated sequel to "*Cudjo's Cave*." Alas, her grandfather had picked it up and was idly leafing through it. She reached out her hand to take it. Just then her mother shook her head. An aged guest and a beloved relative must be humored.

You guessed it. I was that child and the whole incident is vivid in every frustrating detail. I well recall that for days, endless days it seemed to me, I watched my eighty-year old grandfather "reading" the book.

Tall, stately, but with a scholarly stoop, his white beard enhanced by his black, not-often-pressed Prince Albert coat, the top of his bald head encased in an embroidered velvet skull cap, — his was an image to be regarded with a degree of awe.

His calm forehead, above quiet gray eyes sending out thoughtful glances from behind small spectacles or looking down his long nose in a kindly fashion, created an impression of gentle dignity.

As I kept watch over the innocently confiscated book, I would see his eyes close and his head nod as the rocker

in which he sat creaked softly. Often he stood leaning against a door jamb, the book in one hand and his watch in the other as he murmured, "I can sleep for ten minutes before lunch." This stint he proceeded to achieve with exactitude, snapping his watch shut at the precise moment. Sometimes he walked slowly up and down the long hall reading *my* book.

He even took "*The Three Scouts*" upstairs to the bedroom where his frail wife spent most of the time. When I was sent up to the guest room on an errand, as I knocked softly on the door, my heart would be knocking loudly. It was an adventure in itself to look through the door when it was opened, for I was often warned by my parents not to skip or sing in the hall, but to walk quietly past that closed door. "They are old people, you know, and may be taking a nap," they said.

It was a bright, East room with coarse starched white net curtains, unplaited and far from light-resistant. Roller shades could be pulled down if desired but seldom were, since the outlook was high up among the oak branches.

The ingrain carpet with its green pattern of vines and tendrils was a little faded here and there as was the wall paper printed in sprigged roses.

From a picture-rail depended a large painting of Niagara Falls in full rainbow colors. Across the room, in a gold frame, hung a "picture" which immediately proclaimed its unusual nature. A stylized *Tree of Life* with different colored branches, gold and brown for the most part, it revealed on close examination that it was made of human hair.

The top branch on the right was labeled Uncle Polhemus, below him his wife, Aunt Euphemia, followed by



a series of their children. On the left were the lesser relations: cousins and in-laws.

In a nook behind the door, a tiny engraving portrayed Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, carrying her fifteen years with mature dignity as she sat upright in black bombazine in a stiff high-backed chair. I admired her greatly but could never seem to emulate her.

The double bed was fascinating to a child; it had such a neat, austere look with its soft white "honey-comb" bedspread and its large pillow shams. White and stiff they were; yet they struck a cheerful note because of the red pattern in outline stitch. The left-hand one bore a cluster of drooping Easter lilies. The right-hand one showed the same lilies with heads raised as they looked up at the new day. On the left sham an embroidered legend stated "Sweet lilies close their eyes at night." At the right the legend reassuringly ran, "And ope them with the morning light."

One time when my grandmother was in bed with a headache, I remember taking a tray of bread and milk to her and nearly dropping it when I saw a dark gray hair *switch* coiled like a snake in the pillow beside her.

Across the room on the washstand stood a piece of crockery known as the "cracker jar", well filled with soda crackers considered as sure a remedy for insomnia as "Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup."

There were eight other pieces of crockery, exactly matching in color and design. Most of them were on top of the stand, but one, complete with handle and a lid considerably muted by a crocheted cover was on the shelf behind a curtain. A large jar for waste wash water stood on the floor beside the stand. The small pitcher of the set was filled with fresh drinking water each evening by an attentive hostess.

To be sure, this crockery was utilitarian, but color and shapeliness were important. The edges of the large bowl and generous pitcher were fluted in deep curves. The handles were especially fancy and the floral pattern on every piece was a rich lavender. In addition to the wash bowl and pitcher, there was a tooth mug, a toothbrush holder and a three-piece soap dish.

Over the stand a "splasher" similar in general design to the pillow shams was tacked on the wall. Its legend ran, "Wash and wipe you dry; wash again by-and-by." A special feature was the huge natural sponge hung in a string bag at the side of the washstand.

Centrally suspended from the ceiling on a chain and pulley, was a kerosene lamp. This required daily care and must have seemed a task for the guest to extinguish at slumber-time. A tiny china lamp gave its wee nimbus of light all night.

I was practically certain that my grandfather read very little while in his room but he always kept my book beside him while he was there. It was too, too exasperating and a sense of the world's injustice was slowly born in me.

Perhaps a measure of patience also grew in the week that passed before the grandparents' visit ended and my grandfather, with a gentle sigh, laid down the book, still only half read, and said "Goodbye." At last I could devour the tale.

Yet I loved and admired the dear old man. I thought his shawl and his cape equally handsome, his Congress gaiters immensely interesting and I listened to his deep, rumbling voice and slow enunciation with outright veneration.

How well I remember the family Thanksgiving dinner when my father called on a young theological student



guest to ask the blessing. The boy was so frightened that his voice reached only the people next to him. My grandfather at the end of the table, noting a long silence, assumed he had been named. Accordingly he began a blessing. I heard the deep bass rumble in my right ear and the high-pitched murmur in my left, as each continued his grace to the end.

My grandfather's distinction as a minister with a D.D. after his name, was increased for me by the knowledge that he had been a missionary for fifty years in distant lands and was conversant with fifteen languages. He was labeled a "missionary statesman". I recall the long talks he and my father had of an evening. One phrase remained with me and became especially significant in 1913; my grandfather's reiterated conclusion, "There is always trouble in the Balkans. We are going to see more trouble in the Balkans."

I could hear the respect in my mother's voice when she addressed him as "Father" instead of using the more familiar "Papa" which I used in speaking to *my* father.

I watched him walk hand in hand with his precious wife down the long path to the street and I wondered whether I could ever possibly live to be so old. The fact that she was his fourth wife and not my real grandmother, only made the couple more intriguing.

Once my father told me that my grandfather had lived with wife number four twice as long as he had lived in toto with all three of his former helpmeets.

It was considerably later that I learned about his earlier life and above all of the romantic story attached to his first bride.

## *THE MISSIONARY AND HIS BRIDE*

Married in April, 1838 at the age of twenty-four, George Warren Wood already knew what simple living and hard work entailed.

His father and mother, Samuel and Mehitabel Peabody Wood of Bradford, Massachusetts were "in humble life". The father had suffered a mercury burn on foot and leg in infancy, resulting in a life-long painful limp. Not being able to work on his father's farm he had learned the craft of shoemaking. The mother is said to have been "beautiful, sprightly and neat." She shared her husband's chief interest, namely church and religion.

Although the family economy required son George to sew uppers and bootlegs in his father's shop, he was able to attend Bradford Academy and entered Dartmouth College when he was but fourteen years of age. Self-support was a necessity and he worked early and late, even dropping out for one year to earn money by teaching. At college he studied and slept in the Hanover Post Office, rousing himself at three a.m. to place mail bags on the Royalton, Vermont stagecoach. He sawed wood. He ran errands. He taught in a local district school.

After graduation he went to Elizabeth, New Jersey as a schoolmaster. His first experience there was having a severe bout with Asiatic cholera. He was active in church work and gradually became convinced he should offer to enter foreign missionary service. To qualify himself, he rose at dawn and studied theology.



Soon he was accepted as a missionary candidate by Princeton Theological Seminary and then licensed to preach.

At age twenty-four he was appointed to a mission in Singapore, taking with him, as his bride, twenty-year-old Martha Maria Johnson of Morristown, N.J.

Only one month after their marriage they sailed on the barque Albion. "Misfortune was their lot"; gales and storms met them and lightning struck their vessel's topmast. They were driven off their course so that for more than a hundred days they were out of sight of land, arriving at Singapore only in September.

What an experience for the young couple, especially as the wife was already in the early stages of pregnancy!

On shore, creature comforts were denied them, for they were assigned to a Chinese boarding school and printing establishment as living and working headquarters.

George conducted a mission for Chinese immigrants, acquiring facility in Chinese and Malayan languages. Martha Maria kept house and played the musical accompaniment for hymn singing.

A bright spot in their none too varied existence was the friendship they won among the officers of the American fleet in port, from the Admiral down.

I have a picture in my mind of Sunday evenings spent around the little organ, of songs and laughter ("I was seeing Nellie home"; "Over the banister") as homesick naval men enjoyed association with a beautiful American girl and tasted a cup of cocoa and homemade doughnuts from her hand.

The baby was born the following spring but the young wife succumbed within a few hours.

The bereaved husband carried on with his mission work but after a year was instructed to return to his board headquarters in America for a new assignment. Accordingly, after a farewell visit to his wife's grave in the British cemetery, with the infant Maria and a Chinese boy he boarded a barque bound for St. Helena.

This time the voyage was marked by hurricanes off the coast of South Africa and a recurrently drunken captain. Having rescued the latter from falling overboard, my grandfather invaded his quarters to familiarize himself with the mariners' charts and tools of navigation in case he would have to take over the management of the vessel.

It took a hundred days to reach St. Helena where a ninety-day wait for another barque ensued. A limited diet of "fish, potatoes and strong coffee" were shared by adults and baby.

One point of interest was witnessing the removal of Napoleon's remains from his tomb, with full military pomp and cannonading, for transfer to Paris and their permanent resting place in The Dôme des Invalides.

Our travelers boarded a teaship from China and in forty-five days arrived in Philadelphia. With the aid of trains and a two-horse sleigh, the anxious father reached Morristown and was at last able to deliver his baby daughter, Maria, to her apprehensive grandparents.

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On a pleasant Sunday morning almost a hundred years later, I found myself in the little cemetery in Singapore. My steamer's stop-over was accidental as far as I was con-

cerned, but the few hours provided a coveted opportunity to visit the grave of my grandfather's first bride.

The small enclosure was immensely quiet, tucked away from noisy street traffic, shouting vendors and chattering monkeys. A wall down the center separated Catholics from Protestants; the monuments and markers were hoary with age.

I stood by the tomb I had sought out and read the deeply incised inscription on the flat slab surmounting it, an inscription of which I had never heard:

“Sacred to the memory of Martha Maria, wife of Rev. George W. Wood . . . aged twenty-one years. This monument is erected by the Ward's room officers of the U. S. Ship of War, John Adams, as a token of respect for her who lies beneath and of interest in the cause of Christian missions.”

It was a precious moment. I let my mind travel back for a century as I thought of Martha Maria's life tragically cut down so early and then I let it travel on down the years remembering the husband's six added decades filled with activity and service.



## *A TRANSLATOR IN TURKEY*

It was January 1841 when my grandfather reached home from Singapore. His mission board pressed on him an active program of speaking and preaching. One day, invited to a local minister's home, when he was attending a Congregational conference, he became acquainted with another delegate, also a dinner guest, thirty-year-old Miss Martha Briggs, the head of a Young Ladies Seminary and a dedicated worker in her church.

Already under appointment as a missionary to the Armenians in Turkey, he must have presented a heroic figure to her and he found her both personable and mature.

In three months they were married and in three more they sailed from New York for Smyrna. Another barque, another slow-motion voyage, this time fifty-two days.

Lingering in Smyrna only a few weeks, they sailed around the Golden Horn to Constantinople (the modern Istanbul). A passport difficulty resulted in their receiving a temporary entry permit. My grandfather is quoted as having said, "Well, this is good for three months and after that God is merciful." They stayed eight years!

He taught and preached in Armenian and English and when he was found to be a proficient linguist, he was given many tasks of translation.

During these eight years four children were born. The oldest, a daughter, became my mother.\*

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\*Six of her ten children lived to grow up but, at the date of writing, my brother, Elbridge S. Lyon, and I are the only ones surviving.



Our mother's mother came down with a progressive disease and it seemed wise for the family to leave Turkey and return to America.

An overland journey by horseback with the three older children riding in saddlebags slung over the horses' backs took them to a port where the inevitable barque awaited them.

For the six weeks' voyage the family took with them a goat to provide milk for the children and a Hungarian refugee soldier to provide hay for the goat.

In the middle of the passage my seven year old future mother fell through a hatchway landing on a huge pile of rope. This evidence of budding initiative fortunately had no injurious effects. After forty-eight days the barque deposited all of them and their impedimenta on the dock in Boston.

Again my grandfather was assigned a program of speaking, preaching and writing in behalf of the missionary work of his board.

Meanwhile his wife, (my own grandmother) journeyed hither and yon in search of health. The hydropathic treatment of the day was ineffective and she died in their home in Brooklyn three years after their return.

The local church ladies, among whom she had earlier exercised marked leadership, purchased a cemetery lot in Brooklyn. The cost was ninety dollars for an enclosure of three hundred square feet. Grateful to these friends, the twice bereaved husband laid the body of his wife to rest and suggested to his board that he return to Turkey.

Instead of accepting his offer, the board in Boston appointed him to be head of its New York agency. At this time the board was composed of a union of Congregational and Presbyterian missions.

Perhaps it was because he was a widower; perhaps it was because he lived at a boarding house in Hoboken that he developed a procedure of wide travel, speaking and securing contributions. His reports to the board were favorably received because he proved to be an outstanding money-raiser.

## THE MISSIONARY AMBASSADOR

Grandfather's contacts in New York included a growing acquaintance with the well-known Hastings family whose head was the Reverend Thomas Hastings, composer of hymns and tunes, most notably the melody "*Toplady*" to which "*Rock of Ages*" is usually sung. (Incidentally, Dr. Hastings was an albino.)

Yes, he had an attractive daughter, Mary, whose marriage to a minister had been cut short by his death after only six weeks.

Dr. Wood found her easy to win and soon after their marriage in 1855 she welcomed his three surviving children to their new home in New York City. For their honeymoon they went to Montreal because he had addresses to make in that vicinity.

After a brief two months, he had to leave his "reconstituted happy home" to undertake a diplomatic mission for his board to the Choctaw and Cherokee Indian peoples.

The twenty-three page report of his visit was "highly satisfactory" to the board in Boston. Their troubles had all been resolved by his diplomacy.

A copy of the report, identified for me by Richard W. Vierich of the Pomona Library staff and kindly secured from the Library of Congress by Miss Alice Kenton, provides detail.

In the 1830's, the United States Government had forced the removal of 60,000 Indians from Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi to the Southwest with attendant loss of their



lands. This has been called "an inhuman episode." Its influence was a factor in the events leading to the Civil War.

Ten years later, the Choctaw Nation placed four female seminaries under the direction of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. This board was to administer the schools for twenty years, through its local missions, under certain agreed upon "conditions, limitations and restrictions" spelled out in the contract and was to provide one-sixth of the cost.

Hardly had half of the time elapsed, however, before the Choctaw council enacted a new law practically removing administrative power from the mission. Among the provisions were the prohibition of teaching any slave or child of a slave to read or write and the threat of removal of any teacher or administrative officer known to be an abolitionist.

These provisions were unacceptable to the American Board but with my grandfather's discovery that none of the new regulations were being enforced, a resolution of his framing was passed, without publicity, expressing the intention to carry on the school work "on the original basis."

In passing it may be of interest to note that it had never been the policy of the missionaries to teach slaves or their children in school — only in Sunday school!

Another controversial issue presented itself: should missionaries receive into the church any converts who owned slaves?

The diplomatic solution in this instance is one of which this reporter cannot be proud. The adoption of certain "principles" settled the storm:

- The missionary has nothing to do with political questions or agitations.



- Slavery in itself is morally wrong.
- A slaveholder cannot always be esteemed to be a sinner; there may be “justificatory circumstances” and noble intentions.
- The applicant for church membership must show satisfactory evidence that he is in fellowship with Christ.
- All missionaries cannot be expected to have exactly the same points of view; nevertheless the fellowship must be retained intact.

A short while later, the mission among the Cherokees concurred with the above decisions of the mission among the Choctaws.

My grandfather concluded his visits and returned to Boston bearing the thanks of the missionaries and the Indian representatives in the missions, churches and schools and receiving the grateful plaudits of the members of the American Board.

He was away only ten and a half weeks but it must have seemed an eternity, since he traveled 4,519 miles, more than 2,000 of them by rail, over 1,000 by Mississippi river stern-wheeler; he used stage coach in Arkansas and Missouri and wagon or horse and buggy in isolated areas. At one point, he bought a mare from his overnight host and, after riding her 350 miles, sold her at cost. He even walked sixteen miles to reach one destination.

For seven years the family lived happily at 63 Amity Street in New York City in a duplex shared by Dr. and Mrs. Hastings. As a child I recall my parents referring often to “63 Amity Street” until it became a household word.

Then tragedy struck again; Mary Hastings died suddenly of brain fever. Her body was laid to rest in Greenwood Cemetery beside that of Dr. Wood's second wife.

My mother at age twenty became responsible for the housekeeping. In addition to her father, brother and sister, she had as boarders Dr. and Mrs. Hastings, their granddaughter Kittie Scudder, (responsible for my middle name) and many another guest for shorter or longer intervals as her missionary autograph album attests.

For a number of years my grandfather served as a sort of roving ambassador for his board. He went to Washington in regard to Indian affairs and was received by President Lincoln.

He visited Great Britain in behalf of Indians and also to secure sympathy and funds for the Armenians, a minority oppressed by the Turkish majority. He found himself, however, having to lecture on the issues of the Civil War.

For a brief period he was reassigned to Constantinople. The voyage out was by steamship, his first experience with an ocean-going ship other than a barque.

Upon his return to New York he found that the Presbyterians were forming a board of their own with a consequent shrinkage of the New York joint office.

Invited to join the Congregational headquarters staff in Boston, he went very reluctantly. "I am sure the climate of Boston will ruin me." In his new post as an administrator, he wrote advisory letters that are "of historic value as diplomatic documents."

## *THE LATER YEARS*

On one of Dr. Wood's lecture trips in New York State he met a lady whose doctor husband had died twenty years earlier after only two years of married life.

At forty-four she was lovable and quite willing to link her life and fortunes with his. This was the grandmother I knew, such a tidy, comfortable, placid little body. They lived together for thirty-two years.

Two years after their wedding, in 1871, they were sent to Constantinople where they lived and worked for fifteen years. Their headquarters were in Scutari on the grounds of the American College for Girls.

"The Woods" made many friends over the years. Some of these, old and bowed but still bright of eye, greeted me when, in Istanbul on a Y.W.C.A. mission I crossed over to Scutari and visited the College. How they loved to talk with the granddaughter about the grandparents they had venerated.

Repeatedly they spoke of their enjoyment of the daily tea served by Mrs. Wood to the teachers. The very tea service, a delicate buff, originally bought in 1800 for a New York hotel by its manager, a connection of my grandfather's by marriage, has been passed down from one generation to another until I have a few pieces even now, cherished and still attractive.

Upon our missionaries returning to America in 1886, a series of family visits was in order. They came to see Dr. Wood's daughter, my mother, in southern New Jersey



and like other such occasions it was a memorable one, as I tried to show at the beginning of this narrative.

Another of their journeys was far out to Montana to see Dr. Wood's son and his sizable family. He was a missionary to the Indians.

I thought it fascinating that I had a cousin named Montana and I was disappointed when I learned that she preferred to be called Mary. Her father, my uncle, gave up his work in the west and became the treasurer of Henry George's Single Tax Colony in Alabama.

Later, the grandparents, an elderly couple by now, retired to Geneseo, N.Y., largely to be near the missionary sanitarium at Clifton Springs. They lived a quiet life until death called them in 1901 less than a month apart.

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Thirty years later I drove with friends from New York to Toronto and, with their complaisance, turned off the highway on to a road leading into the Geneseo Cemetery. It was a long search to find the graves of my grandfather and his wife but eventually I located the two simple markers.

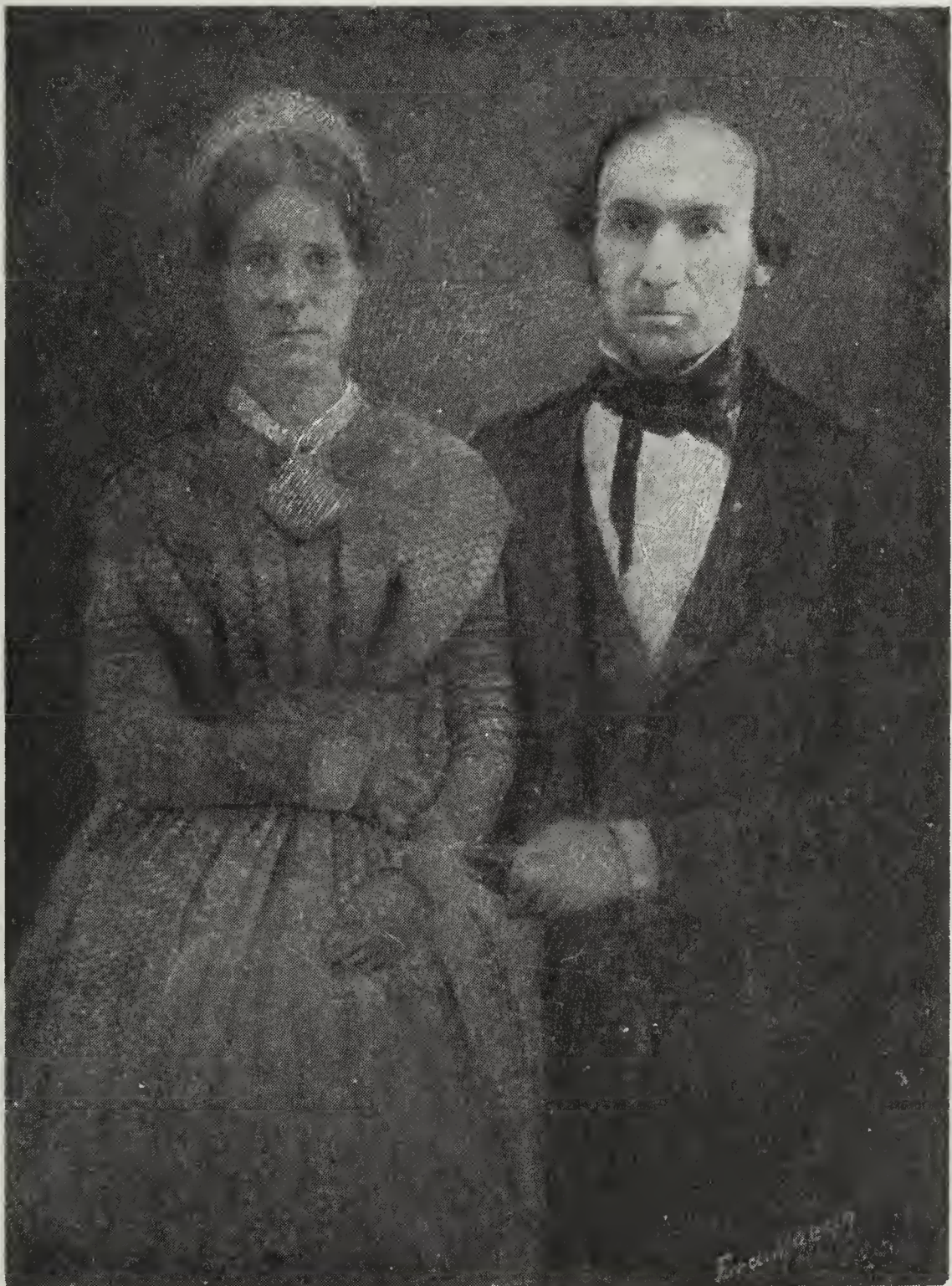
The graves were surrounded by a wealth of carefully cropped lawn. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows at my feet and the quiet and feeling of isolation seemed to spell eternity.

Grandfather's life, long like the shadows, faithful, unselfish and enduring for every one of his eighty-seven years conveyed to me a message of encouragement.

I had a strong sense of identification and continuity as I turned away to take up the routine of daily living.



Dr. and Mrs. Wood - 1841



*Dr. and Mrs. Wood, 1841*







